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AUTHOR Kowalski, Kurt; Tsai, Hailuen
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the linkage between parental socialization practices and attitudes toward school policy by surveying diverse parents' behaviors and attitudes related to ethnic/racial socialization and their views concerning the schools' role in teaching children about ethnicity/race. A group of Chinese parents in Taiwan, and black, white, and Chinese parents living in the United States were surveyed. A questionnaire was constructed in order to discover aspects of parental behavior and attitudes relevant to ethnic/racial socialization and the issue of the schools' role in teaching children about ethnicity and race. Participating parents completed the questionnaires and returned them by mail. Data were collected from 226 parents: 76 white, 20 black, 46 Chinese-Americans, and 84 Chinese in Taiwan. Preliminary findings suggest the hypothesis that parental behaviors and attitudes relevant to ethnic/racial socialization and teaching children about ethnicity/race in school appear to vary with parent's ethnic/racial background. In addition, findings suggest that majority/minority group status in a society is an important variable influencing parental behaviors and attitudes related to ethnic/racial socialization and attitudes toward teaching children about ethnicity/race in school. These preliminary findings suggest that there is considerable variability across ethnic/racial groups with respect to how parents approach ethnic/racial socialization and how they see the role of the schools in this process. Some of this variability seems rooted in the different social experiences parents must encounter as members of either majority or minority groups. (Contains a table of data and nine references.) (BT)

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A Multiethnic Cross Cultural Study of Parental Attitudes and Behaviors Related to Ethnic/Racial Socialization and School Policy: Preliminary Findings

Kurt Kowalski & Hailuen Tsai
The Ohio State University

SO 030 691

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA. April 1998. Address correspondence to Kurt Kowalski, Human Development and Family Science, 1787 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210. E-mail: kowalski.32@osu.edu

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Parents vary with respect to how they approach the task of ethnic/racial socialization (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987). Research suggests this variability in parental behavior is influenced by a number of factors including ethnic/racial group membership (Kofkin, Katz & Downey, 1995; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Phinney & Nakayama, 1991), parent's feelings about their own ethnic/racial identity (Demo & Hughes, 1990; Branch & Newcombe, 1986; Spencer, 1983) and the number of years/generations a family has lived in the United States (Buriel, 1981; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota & Ocampo, 1993). The above noted differences in parental approaches to ethnic/racial socialization are likely accompanied by differences in how parents view the schools with respect to teaching their children about ethnicity/race. The present exploratory study investigates this likely linkage between parental socialization practices and attitudes toward school policy by surveying diverse parents' behaviors and attitudes related to ethnic/racial socialization and their views concerning the schools' role in teaching children about ethnicity/race. Since ethnicity/race is a social construction, special attention was given to exploring the role that sociocultural context plays in the formation of the parental attitudes and behaviors under study.

A sample of Chinese parents in Taiwan and Black, White, and Chinese parents living in the United States were surveyed to achieve the following two purposes.

1. To explore the relations between ethnic/racial group membership and parent's attitudes towards teaching children about ethnicity/race in school, their feelings about their own ethnic/racial identity, and their behaviors relevant to their children's ethnic/racial socialization.

2. To examine how the above attitudes and behaviors vary in parents who share a common ethnic/racial ancestry (i.e., Chinese) but live in very different sociocultural contexts (i.e., the United States verses Taiwan).

Based on previous findings it was hypothesized that parental behaviors and attitudes relevant to ethnic/racial socialization and teaching children about ethnicity/race in school would vary according to parent's ethnic/racial background. In addition, it was hypothesized that the variable ethnic/racial background or ancestry would exert differential influence on parental attitudes and behaviors depending on the parent's sociocultural context. Thus, parents sharing a common Chinese ancestry were expected to demonstrate different attitudes and behaviors relevant to their children's ethnic/racial socialization depending on whether they lived in Taiwan or the United States.

Method

A questionnaire was constructed with multiple items designed to tap several aspects of parental behavior and attitudes relevant to ethnic/racial socialization and the issue of the schools' role in teaching children about ethnicity and race. Parents responded to these items on a four point Likert scale ranging in magnitude from 1, little or no behavior or agreement, to 4, greater behavior or agreement. Descriptions of the five dimensions investigated along with representative items from each follow.

Ethnic behaviors. An index of how often parents engage in traditional ethnic behaviors. Sample

item: "We eat traditional ethnic foods that are associated with our ethnic/racial heritage."
Ethnic/racial discourse. An index of how often parents talk about ethnicity/race in the home. Sample item: " We talk about issues that have to do with ethnicity/race in our home."
Direct teaching. An index of the degree to which parents directly address ethnic/racial socialization. Sample item: "I teach my child/children cultural traditions and practices associated with their ethnic/racial background."
Parental feelings. An index of how parents feel about their own ethnic/racial identity. Sample item: "My ethnic/racial background is important to me."
School policy. An index of the degree to which parents feel the schools should teach children about ethnicity/race. Sample item: "I think schools should teach children about ethnicity/race and prejudice."

In addition to the above, parents were also asked about the ethnic/racial composition of their neighborhood and at what age they thought it was appropriate to talk with children about ethnicity/race. They were also provided with blank space for making additional comments. Demographic information including parent's age, gender, ethnicity/race, resident status in the United States, education, and number children was also collected.

Parents in the United States were recruited at several day care centers, a Chinese language weekend school, and an ethnic Chinese church located in Columbus Ohio, a medium sized Midwestern city. Parents in Taiwan were recruited at two elementary schools.

Participating parents completed the questionnaires anonymously and returned them by mail. The questionnaire was translated from English into Chinese by two translators working independently; any differences in the two translations were then settled through discussion. Parents of Chinese ancestry in both the United States and Taiwan completed the Chinese version of the questionnaire; all other parents completed the English version.

Preliminary Findings

To date, data has been collected from 226 parents: 76 White, 20 Black, 46 Chinese ancestry living in the United States, and 84 Chinese ancestry living in Taiwan. Additional parents are currently being recruited to increase the number of Black parents in the sample. Once this is achieved, the data will be analyzed using multivariate and univariate statistical procedures. For the purpose of this report, some general findings generated from the data collected thus far are presented below. More detailed analysis will be undertaken after data collection is completed.

Parent's mean scores on the five subscales described above by ethnic/racial group and country are displayed in Table 1. These preliminary findings suggest the first hypothesis will be supported (i.e., parental behaviors and attitudes relevant to ethnic/racial socialization and teaching children about ethnicity/race in school appear to vary with parent's ethnic/racial background). White parents consistently scored lower than both Black parents and parents of Chinese ancestry in the United States on all five subscales. In addition, parents of Chinese ancestry in Taiwan consistently scored lower than parents of Chinese ancestry in the United States on all subscales, lending support to the second hypothesis (i.e., ethnic/racial heritage

exerts differential influence on parental attitudes and behaviors depending on parent's sociocultural context). Parents of Chinese ancestry in Taiwan also scored lower than Black parents on all subscales except ethnic behavior.

While it is premature to interpret the above finding prior to the completion of data collection and inferential tests to determine their significance, the pattern of scores do suggest some intriguing possibilities. Taken together the above pattern of findings suggests that majority/minority group status in a society is an important variable influencing parental behaviors and attitudes related to ethnic/racial socialization and attitudes towards teaching children about ethnicity/race in school. That is, parents who are members of the dominant group in a society (i.e., White in the United States and Chinese in Taiwan) appear less invested in teaching children about ethnicity/race in school and ethnic/racial socialization than parents who are members of minority groups (i.e, Black and Chinese in United States). The influence of majority/minority group status is perhaps most forcefully illustrated by the fact that parents of Chinese ancestry in the United States in our sample (mean years in US = 14.2) displayed a pattern of responding to the questionnaire that appears more similar to Black parents than either parents sharing their ethnic/racial ancestry in Taiwan or White parents in the United States. This suggests that the experience of being a minority in a society may be as influential as membership in a particular ethnic/racial group in shaping parents attitudes towards ethnic/racial socialization and teaching children about ethnicity/race.

Nevertheless, the influence of ancestry should not be down played, as illustrated by the fact that irrespective of where they lived, parents of Chinese ancestry scored higher on ethnic behavior (e.g. eating traditional foods and celebrating traditional holidays) than either White or Black parents. In addition, the mean age at which parents of Chinese ancestry thought it was appropriate to talk with children about issues that have to do with ethnicity/race was older (12 in Taiwan and 7 in the United States) than the age indicated by their Black and White counterparts (4 years of age).

Fifty of the parents (22%) wrote qualitative comments on the questionnaire in the space provided. Upon examining those comments several salient themes emerged. Descriptions of these themes, accompanied by brief illustrative excerpts from the comments, follow.

1. Pro Ethnicity Theme: our ethnic ancestry is an important part of who are (e.g. "Culture and racial pride are very important to me and my family.").
2. Privacy Theme: children should be taught about their ethnic/racial heritage in the context of their family and community, not in the schools (e.g., "Race and ethnicity are private matters much like religion and should be respected by the state but not endorsed.").
3. Egalitarian Theme: we are all equal and while we may vary according to ethnic/racial characteristics these are largely unimportant (e.g., "People are people.").
4. Back to Basics Theme: schools should focus on teaching children basic skills (e.g., "I find it difficult to ask the school to try to teach ethnicity, race or cultural practices when schools have a difficult time teaching the basic principles of reading , math, science, and literacy.").
5. Dangerous Theme: focusing on our ethnic/racial differences will lead to increasing conflict in society (e.g., "This pride is dangerous because it diminishes others and can only separate us.").

In conclusion, the above preliminary findings suggest that there is considerable variability across ethnic/racial groups with respect to how parents approach ethnic/racial socialization and how they see the role of the schools in this process. Further, at least some of this variability seems rooted in the different social experiences parents must encounter as members of either minority or majority groups. This suggest that if educators wish to engender support among parents for curricular programs related to ethnicity and race, then differing strategies may be needed when addressing parents from different backgrounds.

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Table 1

Parent's Mean Scores on the Ethnic/Racial Behavior and Attitude Subscales by Ethnic/Racial Group and Country

Subscale	White	Chinese (Taiwan)	Chinese (USA)	Black
School policy	3.06 (.77)	2.83 (.65)	3.35 (.60)	3.57 (.57)
Direct teaching	2.11 (.81)	2.48 (.70)	3.24 (.68)	2.94 (.86)
Ethnic discourse	2.02 (.63)	1.53 (.64)	2.37 (.78)	2.37 (.88)
Ethnic behavior	1.84 (.62)	2.62 (.92)	3.52 (.41)	2.22 (.72)
Parental feelings	2.38 (.82)	3.18 (.95)	3.44 (.63)	3.65 (.50)

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.

Note. Possible range for each subscale mean score, 1 to 4.